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SUBJECT: BRUNEI RELEASES FIVE ISA DETAINEES

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¶1. The Government of Brunei (GOB) has announced release of five detainees held without public trial on counterfeiting charges since February 2004 under provisions of the Internal Security Act (ISA). Detentions under the ISA are usually for two-year renewable periods, but in this case the release date was probably adjusted to coincide with national celebrations of the Sultan's birthday on July 15. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the release followed successful "rehabilitation" of the detainees. All five swore an oath of allegiance to the Sultan at a local mosque and pledged to abide by Bruneian law.

¶2. The released detainees were among sixteen members of a counterfeiting ring originally arrested under the ISA for "an attempt to sabotage the economic stability of the country." A total of BDOL\$ 783,500 (approx USDOL\$ 515,460) in counterfeit notes was confiscated during the investigation. At the time of their arrest in 2004, the ISA was invoked partly because penalties for counterfeiting under then-current law were deemed too lenient by the GOB given the scale of the ring's alleged activities. (New counterfeiting laws with stricter penalties have since been passed.) Thirteen of the original sixteen detainees were Bruneian citizens, one a permanent resident, one Malaysian, and one Filipino.

¶3. Coming on top of previous releases, by our count this latest action leaves only two of the original sixteen alleged counterfeiters still incarcerated, one Bruneian citizen and one non-Bruneian citizen. (Bruneian law does not obligate the GOB to release any information about actions taken under the ISA, not even to identify the detainees.) The names and ages of the five individuals granted their freedom under this latest release are: Sofri bin Dahali, 40; Haji Abdul Salam bin Haji Dollah, 51; Bakar bin Haji Bali, 40; Haji Razali bin Haji Kahan, 58; and, Juni bin Haji Garip, 42.

4 Comment: Embassy estimates that this latest release leaves a total of eleven individuals still detained without public trial under the ISA: the two remaining alleged counterfeiters; Noordin bin Haji Ahmed Noor, age 64, a former police officer arrested in March 2004 for allegedly selling classified GOB documents to an unspecified foreign nation; and eight individuals whom we believe were arrested in May 2005 for alleged narcotics trafficking. Assuming that estimate is correct, this is the lowest number of individuals detained by the GOB without public trial under the ISA since at least 2003. The reduction in ISA detainees probably does not, however, reflect any diminution of the GOB's willingness to employ the ISA in those cases where it deems it necessary to do so. End Summary.
SKODON